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Embracing Innovation, Focusing on Accountability Hamilton County's policy agenda for 2013-2014

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By Chris Monzel
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Introduction

Hamilton County government has squarely-faced the challenges of the recession and post-recession recovery, accepting years of reductions in spending and staffing while fulfilling a mandate to continue providing quality services to our residents. The 2013 County General Fund budget is approximately 70% of its 2007 funding level. Corresponding county staffing is down over 1,700 positions during the same period. The County has truly done more with less without an appreciable reduction in services or quality of service. This is a testament to the exceptional individuals and leadership in every County department.

With such a dramatic reduction in resources, the Board must focus its efforts to bring about the greatest and most impactful outcomes for the County. Hamilton County government learned that essential services must take priority over desired programs and popular projects. The taxpayer and the business owner remind us that they vote not only at the ballot box, but more importantly with their feet. Progress in the County is best measured by business expansions, jobs created, and the people who raise their families in our communities.

During the two-year term of this policy agenda, the Board of Commissioners will review funding sources and determine if the County is currently funding programs and services that should be funded by the federal, state or even local jurisdictions within Hamilton County. As the County's primary policy body, the most important decisions and contributions of this board are to ensure a viable future for Hamilton County. Consequently, this 2013/2014 Policy Agenda provides clear direction to the County Administration as to priorities of the Board:

- ***Strong Financial Management and Responsible Tax Policies***
- ***Maintain and Manage Key Infrastructures***
- ***Encourage, Expand and Eliminate Barriers to Economic Development***

The recommendations outlined above and detailed in this policy document do not stand alone. Progress was made during the previous two-year Policy Agenda initiated by Commissioner Hartmann in 2010. The Board will review each of the priorities from that term and align our goals where possible and examine those instances where progress was less than optimal. The financial landscape and opportunities are ever-changing and as a Commission we will adjust accordingly, yet understanding the need for continuity where progress is taking place.

Strong Financial Management and Responsible Tax Policies

Property Tax Policy and Levy Review: The Hamilton County Tax Levy Review Committee (TLRC) was established to balance the needs of various levy-funded public services with the goal of maintaining Hamilton County as a competitive place to live and work by keeping the overall tax burden as low as possible. The TLRC reviews each levy prior to its placement on the ballot and advises the Board of Commissioners on appropriateness and effectiveness of programs and overall funding levels.

During 2013, the TLRC will conduct a review of the levy proposal for the Zoo and Botanical Gardens, in addition to a mid-point review for the Indigent Care Levy, the latter of which was shortened to a three-year cycle in order to assess the impact of the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act on indigent healthcare and thus the programmatic scope of that particular levy.

The Board of County Commissioners will request that the TLRC will continue their efforts to identify any redundancies that exist within the levies or whether any other operational efficiencies may be achieved.

Long-Term Financial Planning: During 2013, the Board will take concerted action to ensure that the County is making financial decisions which not only serve its short-term goals, but also appropriate policies and procedures to effectively govern how these decisions impact the long-term finances of the County. For example, as the Board continues its ownership and management of the Metropolitan Sewer District (MSD), the County will ensure that as it begins the process of setting rates to appropriately fund the capital work of the consent decree/wet weather program, that those rate-setting decisions are based, to the degree possible, on policies designed to control long-term program costs and rates. The Board will establish a policy framework—in 2013—to govern the capital financing decisions associated with major long-term projects of the County to ensure we are delivering the best value for our taxpayers and ratepayers. Long-term financial planning will also guide policy direction on the Facilities Master Plan as well as financing major information technology systems including Board of Elections ballot and voter registration systems and the public safety 800 MHz radio system.

Shared services: Hamilton County continues to be a leader in the area of shared services. Several county functions serve as a consortium or "umbrella" for other local government partners. From the 9-1-1 Center which serves the public safety communications needs of over 105 police, fire and EMS agencies to the Department of Environmental Services which conducts air quality compliance programming for the four-county region, Hamilton County has done its part in encouraging coordinated and shared services. The County shall continue to strive to lead in pooling resources and sharing services, both internally and in conjunction with other local jurisdictions.

The County's future efforts, however, must be carefully measured and practical. In 2013, the County will explore the opportunities to co-locate its planning and development functions within other jurisdictions throughout the County to improve services, pursue shared purchasing efforts and focus on internal collaboration across County departments.

Maintain and Manage Key Infrastructures

Metropolitan Sewer District: MSD is the largest public utility in the region. It is owned by the County and operated by the City of Cincinnati in accordance with a 50-year agreement that expires in 2018. The Board of Commissioners plans to conduct a comprehensive review of MSD during 2013 to ensure the very best in management practices and cost effectiveness. The County Administration will develop a more robust and integrated MSD oversight function, given the fact that MSD is in the midst of a \$3 billion, federally-mandated capital improvement program – perhaps the largest public works effort ever undertaken in our region. The County will also examine alternatives to the governance, management and ownership of the utility, given that MSD today is vastly different from anything imagined in 1968.

The County will continue to provide support for the Metropolitan Sewer District Combined Sewer Overflows (MSD CSO) Communities National Coalition initiative that seeks to achieve policy support for a GreenBuild program of storm water policy objectives.

Transportation: Hamilton County will continue to play a vital role in the maintenance and development of critical transportation infrastructure for the community. The County will also continue its significant partnership role with the State of Ohio—through the County's Transportation Improvement District (TID) as well as through its partnerships with the Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana Regional Council of Governments (OKI) and the Port of Greater Cincinnati Development Authority.

The County will continue to fund the transportation-related work of the Port of Greater Cincinnati Development Authority which will be seeking to increase the scope and scale of inland port operations and will be conducting a Cargo Market and Economic Impact study of regional transportation assets. The goal of these endeavors will be to better position the County to take advantage of the global freight and cargo market and to explore tactical opportunities such as the location of commercial distribution centers in Hamilton County.

In addition to these efforts, the County will continue to work with its local and regional partners to:

- Advance collaborative projects through the work of the TID
- Partner, where possible, to assist with the elimination of congestion within our local rail infrastructure.
- Work to champion and advance the I-75 "through the valley" corridor program.
- Advocate, where possible, for communities and our County Engineer to receive the State resources needed to continue to maintain the basic roadways that are the cornerstone of our community's ability to productively live and do business.

Public buildings: Hamilton County currently owns over 100 buildings encompassing over 3 million square feet. These buildings range from small maintenance and storage facilities to a 700,000 square foot detention center currently housing 1,200 inmates. While some of these buildings are of recent construction, many are older structures which have been adapted for use by the County and its various departments. These buildings, in particular, are costly to operate

and maintain. In addition, the County owns hundreds of land parcels – the vast majority of which provide little functional service to the operation of government.

During 2013, the County will develop a Facilities Master Plan to gain a better understanding of how, over the next decade, the changing business needs of its critical operations will spur the need for either more or less building space. In general, the County will be analyzing whether it makes most sense, from an economic and service provision perspective, to continue to operate and invest in its current building stock, consolidate operations within its current buildings, purchase additional space, or construct new space to facilitate a more consolidated operation. Additionally, the County will be exploring ways to work with the private sector more closely to advance the disposition of many of the parcels currently owned by the County and to return those properties to productive use in the County.

Public Safety, Public Health and the Environment: Because improving public safety remains a pressing need faced by the County, the county shall support the implementation of criminal justice policy recommendations from the county Re-Entry Office that allow for re-entry and positive re-assimilation of former inmates into our community that reflect an appropriate balance between maintaining such secure facilities to house dangerous inmates as are required with less costly means to address other types of prisoners.

Encourage, Expand and Eliminate Barriers to Economic Development

Development services: In 2013, Hamilton County will seek to redefine its development services functions – primarily its Building Plan Review and Inspection functions – in a manner that improves the relationship with our customers. With the change of management within this Department, the County will be initiating service options that will provide our customers with a noticeable difference in the quality of service and in the efficiency with which development can occur in Hamilton County. The development of satellite plan review offices, a new web portal, opportunities for expedited plan review and a streamlined fee structure are all elements of the new vision for customer service which will dominate our thinking and expand development in 2013 and beyond.

Economic Development Partnerships: In 2013, the County will finalize development of its Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy which will encourage economic development and help coordinate the County's efforts and investments in this arena over the next 5 years. The Board will re-evaluate the most efficient use of general fund dollars as circumstances require as a means to pursue robust economic development activity. The Hamilton County Development Company (HCDC) will continue in its lead role of securing jobs and business investment through business retention programming focusing on tax incentives and small business loans as well as operation of its business incubator to spur new entrepreneurial growth.

The Port Authority will focus heavily on the issue of large, strategic site acquisition, land development and blight reduction through various financing programs and operation of the Hamilton County Land Bank. In 2013, the Moving Ohio Forward Program and the Land Bank's Focus Neighborhood Strategies will both continue their successful work to achieve blight reduction in Hamilton County communities.

The County will also continue its investment in the Cincinnati USA Partnership which serves as the regional hub for the State's JobsOhio program to improve economic development opportunities for business retention and attraction. All of these efforts and organizations working in concert will maximize the County's effort to eliminate barriers to new business and development

High-Priority Development Sites: HCDC has identified five high-priority development sites throughout the county that have the greatest promise of attracting significant private economic development investment. In consultation with the recently reconstituted Port Authority, it was determined that the Landmark Baptist site that straddles the cities of Evendale and Glendale should be the primary focus. During 2013, HCDC will lead the County's efforts to activate this site for focused redevelopment.

The Banks Project: Phase I of The Banks project was a resounding success with 91% of the retail space and 100% of the residential space currently leased. Efforts in 2013 should be made to continue the momentum of this County/City joint riverfront re-development project. Specifically, during 2013, the project team should complete development agreements and begin construction for both the Phase I hotel and residential units in Phase IIA (Block 2).

Conclusion: The three focus areas of Financial Management, Infrastructure and Economic Development are inter-related. By focusing the County's efforts on these core priorities, we can best position the County to sustain existing programs and increase the potential for investment in other areas. Economic development requires reliable, cost effective infrastructure and reasonable taxation. Successful economic development also helps sustain strong public financial management and support maintenance of infrastructures used by residents, businesses and visitors. With Board approval of this 2013-2014 policy document, the Board charges the Administration with developing a management work plan to execute these priorities.